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TRUMPETER FRED

By CAPTAIN CHARLES KING U·S·A·

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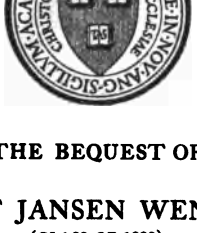

THE BEQUEST OF

EVERT JANSEN WENDELL
(CLASS OF 1882)
OF NEW YORK

1918

Very truly Yours
Charles King
Brig. General U.S.V.
Comdg 1st Brig. 1st Division.
April 1899. 8th Corps, Manila.

York City.

Trumpeter Fred

ILLUSTRATED.

BY

CAPTAIN CHARLES KING, U. S. A.

AUTHOR OF

"Warrior Gap," "A Wounded Name," "Fort Frayne," "A Garrison Tangle," "Noble Blood and a West Point Parallel," "An Army Wife," "Found in the Philippines," etc., etc.

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TRUMPETER FRED.

TRUMPETER FRED.

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TRUMPETER FRED.

CHAPTER I.

A DANGEROUS MISSION.

THERE were only thirty in all that night when the troop reached the Niobrara and unsaddled along the grassy banks. Rather slim numbers for the duty to be performed, and with the captain away, too. Not that the men had lack of confidence in Lieutenant Blunt, but it was practically his first summer at Indian campaigning, and, however well a

young soldier may have studied strategy and grand tactics at West Point, it is something very different that is needed in fighting these wild warriors of our prairies and mountains. Blunt was brave and spirited, they all knew that; but in point of experience even Trumpeter Fred was his superior. All along the dusty trail, for an hour before they reached the ford, the tracks of the Indian ponies had been thickly scattered. A war party of at least fifty had evidently gone trotting down stream not six hours before the soldiers rode in to water their tired and thirsty steeds. No comrades were known to be nearer at hand than the garrison at Fort Laramie, fifty long miles away, or those guarding the post of

Fort Robinson, right in the heart of the Indian country, and in the very midst of the treacherous tribes along White River. And yet, under its second lieutenant and with only twenty-nine "rank and file," here was "B" Troop ordered to bivouac at the Niobrara crossing, and despite the fact that all the country was alive with war parties of the Sioux, to wait there for further orders.

"Only twenty-nine men all told and a small boy," said Sergeant Dawson, who was forever trying to plague that little trumpeter. It was by no means fair to Fred Waller, either, for while he was somewhat undersized for his fifteen years, his carbine and his Colt's revolver were just as big

and just as effective as those of any man in the troop, and he knew how to use them, no matter how hard the "Springfield" kicked. He rode one of the tallest horses, too, and sat him well and firmly, notwithstanding all his furious plunging and "buckings," the day that Dawson slipped the thorny sprig of a wild rosebush under the saddle blanket.

From the first sergeant down to the newest recruit, all the men had grown fond of little Fred in that year of rough scouting and campaigning around old Red Cloud's reservation—all of them, that is to say, with the possible exception of Dawson, who annoyed him in many ways when the officers or first sergeant did not

happen to be near, and who sometimes spoke sneeringly of him to such of the troopers as would listen, but these were very few in number.

Fred was the only son of brave old Sergeant Waller, who had served with the regiment all over the plains before the great war of the rebellion, and who had been its standard-bearer in many a sharp fight and stirring charge in Virginia. Now he carried two bullet wounds, and on his bronzed cheek a long white seam, a saber scar, as mementoes of Beverly Ford, Winchester, and Five Forks, and through the efforts of his war commanders a comfortable berth as ordnance sergeant had been secured for him at one of the big frontier posts along the railway.

Fred was the pride of the old soldier's heart, and nothing would do but that he, too, must be a trooper. The boy was born far out across the plains in sight of the Chihuahua Mountains, had fellowed the regiment in his mother's arms up the valley of the Rio Grande to the Albuquerque, then eastward along the Indian-haunted Smoky Hill route to Leavenworth. When the great war burst upon the nation little Fred was just beginning to toddle about the whitewashed walls of the laundresses' quarters—his father was Corporal Waller then—and his baby eyes were big as saucers when he was carried aboard of a big steamship and paddled down the muddy Missouri and around

by Cairo and up the winding Ohio to Cincinnati. He was even more astonished at the railway cars that bore the soldiers and a few women and children eastward and finally landed them at Carlisle. There at the old cavalry barracks the little fellow grew to lusty boyhood, while his father was bearing the blue and gold standard through battle after battle on the Virginia soil. And when the war was over and the regiment was hurried out to "the plains," and again to protect the settlers, the emigrants, and the railway builders from the ceaseless assaults of the painted Indians, little Fred went along, and his soldier education was fairly begun.

Old Waller was now first ser-

geant of "B" troop. The regimental commander and most of the officers were greatly interested in the laughing, sun-tanned, blue-eyed boy, who rode day after day on his wiry Indian pony along the flanks of the column, scorning, though barely seven years old, to stay in the wagons with the women and children. Everybody had a jolly word of greeting for Fred, and kind-hearted Captain Blaine set his "company tailor" to work, and presently there was made for the boy a natty little cavalry jacket and a tiny pair of yellow chevrons. "Corporal Fred" they called him then, and, though he strove hard not to show it, grim old Sergeant Waller was evidently as proud

and pleased as the child. He taught the little man to "stand attention" and bring up his chubby brown hand in salute whenever an officer passed by, and most scrupulously was that salute returned. He early placed the boy under the instruction of the veteran chief trumpeter, and made him practice with the musicians as soon as he was "big enough to blow," as he expressed it. And then, too (for there were no army schools, or schoolmasters in those days), regularly as the day came round and the sergeant's morning duties were done, he had his boy at his knee, book or slate in hand, patiently teaching him the little that he knew himself, and wistfully looking for some better instructor.

CHAPTER II.

THE OATH OF ENLISTMENT.

IT was while stationed at old Fort Sanders that Waller's enthusiastic devotion to his new captain and his captain's family began. The former troop commander was ordered to the retired list, broken down by wounds, and the senior lieutenant stepped into his place. Waller bade farewell to his old captain with tear-dimmed eyes—they had served together for over fifteen years—and with much inward misgiving, but

not the faintest outward show thereof, saluted the new arrival, a young officer but a soldier through and through; it was not a week before the sergeant had fully satisfied himself as to that. Presently the new captain's family reached the fort and took up their abode; a fair-haired, blue-eyed young mother with two children, a boy and a girl, the eldest being three years younger than Fred; and then began another and strong interest.

That very winter scarlet fever devastated the fort. Few children escaped the scourge. There were a dozen little graves in the cemetery out on the prairie when the long winter came to an end. There were two or three larger

graves, and one of these held all that was mortal of Fred's loving mother; he and his stern, sad-faced father were now alone in the world.

And Captain Charlton's little household had not been spared. It was among the officers' quarters that the pestilence had first appeared. Frank and Florence Charlton were among the children earliest stricken. The servants fled the house, as frontier servants will, and their place was promptly supplied by Mrs. Waller. She and her husband would listen to no remonstrance, and Mrs. Charlton, overwhelmed with care and dread, was only too glad to have the strong, cheery army woman's help. Over the little brown cot-

ADDRESSED IN A ROUND BOYISH HAND.

tage the shadow of death hovered for days before it was lifted and borne away, and when at last all danger was over and all was again all hope and peace the sergeant's wife went back to her own humble roof across the parade, and there suddenly sickened and died. When the scourge was finally swept from the garrison and the soft winds began to blow from the South, the stricken old soldier was glad of the chance to go with his troop into the field-service, and was almost happy in one thing. Mrs. Charlton had taken his boy as one of her own, and each day she was teaching him faithfully and well. When the troop rode away from Sanders Fred was left behind to occupy a little room

under the captain's roof. "Remember, sir, you are sergeant of the guard, and that house and that household are your special charge for all summer long," were Waller's parting words to his boy.

Regularly as the mail reached the troop during its summer scouting Captain Charlton's home missives had their messages for Sergeant Waller; and soon, to his unspeakable joy, letters all his own, addressed in a round boyish hand that grew firmer every week, began to come as his share of the welcome package. Never would he presume to ask for news, yet the captain was not slow to notice how old Waller was sure to be busy close at hand when the home letters came, and prompt to

answer, and with soldierly salute to stand erect before his young commander and strive not to show the pride and delight that tingled in every vein at the glowing words in which Mrs. Charlton told of his boy's rapid progress and his devotion to her and the children. His lip would quiver uncontrollably and his eyes fill; his hand might tremble as it touched the brim of his scouting hat, but the salute was precise as ever.

"I thank the captain, and beg to thank the captain's kind lady," was his invariable formula on such occasions. "I hope the boy will always do his duty."

And then he would face about and stride away with his head very high in the air and his eyes blink-

ing hard, and almost immediately his voice would be heard sternly berating some trooper whose horse had tangled himself in his lariat, or whose "kit" was not stowed in proper shape about the saddle. It was his way of striving to hide the joy those messages brought him, and the men were quick to see through it all, and little "Reddy" Mulligan, reprimanded for the third time within a fortnight, started a laugh all through the bivouac by his whimsical protest:

"It's more good news you've been getting from Fred, sergeant, dear; isn't it now? Faith, I wish he'd play ye a thrick wanst in a while, like other byes. Maybe thin I'd be mintioned to the cap-

tain for a corporalship." And for once the veteran turned his back on the laughing troop conscious of defeat.

In '74 old Waller changed the yellow stripes and diamond of the first sergeantcy for the crimson and the star of the ordnance, and the troopers, one and all, said good-by to him with infinite regret. Perhaps Dawson, who was next in rank, may be excepted. He confidently expected to be promoted in Waller's place. But though a dashing soldier and a smart non-commissioned officer, he was not the stanch, reliable man the captain needed, and proved it by celebrating Waller's promotion in a very boisterous and unseemly manner. It was plain that he

had been drinking heavily, and though Captain Charlton saved him from arrest and court-martial he would not promote him, and plainly, though privately, told him why. The troop knew it was for this reason, but Dawson swore it was all on account of Waller's influence against him when Sergeant Graham was named in regimental orders as the old veteran's successor.

That same summer, with firm hand and glistening eyes, Waller signed his consent to the enlistment of his son as trumpeter in the old troop. How he watched the boy's glowing face as the oath of enlistment, so often lightly spoken, was solemnly repeated, and Fred was bound to the serv-

ice of his country. How he trembled from head to foot when, but a few weeks afterward and in the dead of night, Charlton and his men hurried forth to intercept a band of Indians who had swooped down upon the herders south of Laramie Peak. Waller could hardly buckle the cantle-straps of Fred's saddle as the little fellow, all eagerness, was bustling about his horse in the dim light of the stable lanterns. Yet when the captain and Lieutenant Rayburn came trotting briskly down the roadway and the men were silently "leading into line," it was the old sergeant's hand that grasped the boy's left foot and swung him lightly into his seat.

"Whatever happens, sir, mind you keep close to the captain," was his parting injunction to his boy. Then his heels came together with the old cavalry "click" and his twitching fingers were stiffened as they went suddenly up in salute to Mr. Rayburn, who bent down from his saddle to say that they would try and take good care of Fred. But Waller answered:

"I thank the lieutenant. The boy is a soldier now, sir. He must take his chances with the rest." Then with one lingering clasp of the trumpeter's hand, "Join your captain," he ordered, and turned away into the darkness.

But the sentry on No. 6 bore witness to the fact that the ord-

nance sergeant never went to bed again all that night, and the men sent to unload and store the ammunition that came next day from Rock Island Arsenal declared that old Waller was gruffer than ever. All the next night too, he was awake, waiting, watching for tidings from the North. Nothing came until sunset of the second day, just as the whole command was turning out for retreat parade, and then Corporal Rock rode in with dispatches and trotted straight to where the commanding officer was standing in front of the adjutant's office. All eyes were upon him as he threw himself from the saddle and handed the packet to the colonel. Half a dozen officers hastened to join

their commander as he tore it open. The piazzas of the officers' quarters were quickly alive with ladies and children, breathlessly eager to hear the news. The colonel's orderly was seen hastening to the surgeon's house — that looked ominous — then Rock remounted; trotted to Captain Charlton's gate, where Mrs. Charlton was tremblingly awaiting him. "It's all right, ma'am," he hastened to say. "Leastwise the captain's safe, but Mulligan is shot—and Ryan and Sergeant Frazer." She hurried in the house with the precious letter he placed in her hands, and while several ladies hastened to join her, the messenger returned to the office.

All this while Sergeant Waller

had stood like a statue under the tall white flag-staff where the non-commissioned staff assembled at retreat, watching every move with dry, aching eyes, and a face gray as his mustache.

CHAPTER III.

A ROBBER IN CAMP.

THE trumpet played the retreat, the sunset gun thundered its good-night to the god of day; the adjutant hurried over and received the reports of the companies, the staff, and band, and then a messenger came running to them: "Mrs. Charlton wants you, Sergeant Waller. Fred's all safe, but they had a sharp fight."

The old man could not trust himself to speak. "Listen to this, sergeant," exclaimed Mrs. Charl-

ton, as she hurried through the little group of ladies at her doorway, and looked up in his face with tear-dimmed eyes:

"Tell Waller that in a running fight of four miles Fred rode close at my heels and no man could have shown more spirit or less fear. I am sure it was a shot from his carbine that tumbled one war pony into the Laramie; and every call he had to sound rang out clear as a bell. I'm proud of the boy."

Waller's face was twitching and working; he cleared his throat and tried to speak; he dashed his hand across his eyes and ground his heels into the gravel of the

walk; he heard the kind and gentle voices of the ladies joining in the chorus of congratulation, but he could not see their faces; a mist had risen before his eyes. Even the old formula, "I thank the captain's lady," had deserted him. He mumbled some inarticulate words, and then, in dread of disastrous breakdown, turned suddenly away and strode across the drive. More than one woman was in tears. There was not a ripple of faintest laughter when it was seen that in his blindness the old sergeant had collided with the tree box at the edge of the acequia. Straight to his humble quarters he went; but they were beautiful to him, radiant with the light of joy, pride, gratitude, and

love that beamed and burnt in his honest heart.

And now, a year later, all the cavalry was in the field. Gold had tempted explorers and miners innumerable to the Black Hills of Dakota—Indian land by solemn treaty. The Government warned the invaders back, but to no purpose. The Indians swarmed from the agencies and massacred all whom they could overpower. Charlton's troop had early been hurried up to Red Cloud, and now with others was engaged in the perilous work of patrolling the trails around the Indian haunts.

Two months of hard and most exciting work had they had, and still the troubles were not over; and then just after the paymaster

with his iron safe and bristling escort had paid the outlying posts a visit, and Captain Charlton had been ordered in with him to attend a court-martial at Fort Laramie, there came a week that no man in "B" troop ever forgot.

Mr. Rayburn had been wounded and was in the hospital at Fort Robinson. Twenty of the men were away on escort duty, and so it happened that only young Lieutenant Blunt and about thirty troopers were left at the camp just west of the Agency. Fearful that the money, "burning" as it always does in the soldiers' pockets, would tempt his men to gamble or drink and get into mischief around the crowded post, Charlton had ordered that the troop should

march at once to the Niobrara and wait there for his return. It was known, of course, that many Indian bands were out, and it promised to be adventurous. It was Mr. Blunt's first independent command, too, and he felt a trifle nervous. All went well, however, until the morning of the second day, when Sergeant Graham excitedly called his young commander, his face clouded with dismay.

"Lieutenant," he cried, "Sergeant Dawson and several men were robbed last night. The money's clean gone!"

Blunt was out of his blanket in an instant. "How much is missing?" he asked.

"I can't tell yet, sir—a good

deal. But that is not the worst of it."

"What on earth could be worse?"

"Trumpeter Waller's gone, sir —deserted; taken his horse, arms, and everything!"

CHAPTER IV.

SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES.

LIEUTENANT BLUNT'S position on this bright July morning was most embarrassing. Personally he had known the pet trumpeter of "B" troop less than a year; for, as was said in the previous chapter, in point of actual experience on the frontier the boy was the superior of the young West Pointer, who had joined only the preceding autumn. Finding young Fred so great a favorite

among the officers and men, Mr. Blunt was quite ready to accept the general verdict, although his first impression of the youngster was that he was a trifle spoiled. On the other hand no other man in the troop had so favorably impressed the new officer as the "left principal guide," Sergeant Dawson, whose dashing horsemanship, fine figure and carriage, and sharp, soldierly ways had attracted his attention at the first outset. Then Dawson's manner to him was so scrupulously deferential and soldierly on all occasions—sometimes the old war-worn sergeants would be a trifle supercilious with green subalterns—that Blunt's moderate amount of vanity was touched.

He was always glad, when his turn came round as officer of the guard, to find Sergeant Dawson on the detail, and he recalled, when he came to think over the events of his first half year with the regiment that very summer, that it was when on guard he began to imagine Fred Waller was "somewhat spoiled." Twice the boy "marched on" as orderly trumpeter when he and Dawson were on the guard detail for the day, and both times the sergeant had found fault with the musician, and had most respectfully and diplomatically, but in that semi-confidential manner which shrewd old soldiers so well know how to assume to very young subalterns, given Mr. Blunt to understand

that the boy "needed looking after." Months later, when Blunt and Rayburn were discussing the probabilities of promotion, when the sergeant-major of the regiment took his discharge and there was lively competition among the soldiers for this, the finest non-commissioned post in the regiment, Blunt warmly advocated Dawson's claim. "He is the nattiest sergeant in the whole command," he said, "and the smartest one I know."

"Oh, yes!" answered Rayburn with a certain superiority of manner and a quiet sarcasm that provoked the junior officer; "there's no question about Dawson's smartness. One after another every 'plebe' in the

regiment starts in with the same enthusiasm about Dawson. I had it myself about eight years ago. But the trouble with him is he isn't a stayer; he can't stand prosperity."

But Blunt preferred to hold to his own views and his faith in the second sergeant of the troop. And so it happened that on this eventful morning he sent Sergeant Graham at once to investigate as to the amounts stolen during the night, and directed that Sergeant Dawson, who was in command of the herd and picket guard, should come to him immediately.

The sun was just rising above the low treeless ridges on the horizon as the lieutenant stood erect

and looked about him. Close at hand the Niobrara — "the Running Water" — was brawling over its stony shallows, and the smoke of tiny cook-fires was floating upward into the keen, crisp, morning air. Northward the slopes were bare and treeless, too, but closely carpeted with the dense growth of buffalo grass. Only a few yards out from the bivouac, hoppled and sidelined, the troop horses were cropping the still juicy herbage, and three or four soldiers, carbine in hand and garbed in their light-blue overcoats, were posted well out beyond the herd on every side, watching the valley far and near for any signs of Indian coming. Below the bivouac, and further

from the Laramie road, was an old log hut, once used as a ranch and "bar" for thirsty souls traversing the well-worn way to the reservation; but the tide of travel had first shifted to the Sidney route, and then been stemmed entirely, so far as the line to or near the agencies was concerned, and the proprietor had taken himself and his fiery poison to better-paying fields. Far away to the southwest the blue cone of Laramie Peak stood boldly against the sky. Nearer at hand, though a day's ride away, old Rawhide Butte rose sturdily from the midst of surrounding prairie slopes. Upstream, among some sparse cottonwood, a bit of ruddy color among the branches

caught the lieutenant's quick eye. Some Indian brave, wrapped in his blanket, had been laid to rest there out of reach of the snarling coyotes, one of whom could be dimly discerned slinking away under the bank, just out of easy rifle range.

Off to the south lay the same bold, barren, desolate-looking expanse of rolling prairie. Blunt could not suppress a shudder as he thought of the terrible risk the boy had run in his mad break for the settlements beyond the Platte. Of course he could go nowhere else. North, east, and west, all was Indian land, and no lone white man could live there. Of course he was making for the cattle ranges and settlements in

Nebraska. Such at least were the lieutenant's theories. He had spent only one year on the frontier, but had been there long enough to know that among the cowboys, ranchmen, and especially among the "riff-raff" ever hanging about the small towns and settlements, a deserter from the army was apt to be welcomed and protected, if he had money, arms, or a good horse. Once plundered of all he possessed, the luckless fellow might then be turned over to the nearest post and the authorized reward of thirty dollars claimed for his apprehension; but if well armed and sober, the deserter had little trouble in making his way through the toughest mining camps and settlements.

CHAPTER V.

TRAILING THE TRAITOR.

FRED Waller knew all the Valley of the North Platte as well as he did the trails around Sanders and Red buttes, and if he could succeed in eluding the Indian war parties, he would have no difficulty in fording the river, or swimming if necessary; and, with the start he must have had, his light weight, and powerful horse, it would be next to impossible to catch him, even if they could follow his trail. Besides,

were they not ordered to remain at the Niobrara until Charlton's return? The more Mr. Blunt thought of the matter the more worried and perplexed he became. Anywhere else he might have sent a sergeant with a couple of men in pursuit, but here it would be exposing them to almost certain death. It was some minutes before Sergeant Dawson came in answer to the summons. Blunt could see the troopers gathered about the first sergeant, excitedly discussing the affair and bemoaning their individual losses. Graham was noting the amounts on a slip of paper, and his fine face was pale with distress. "Is that all now, men?" he asked as he completed

the list, then sharply turned away, and once more approached his young commander.

"Lieutenant," he said, halting and raising his hand in salute, "it isn't quite so bad as I feared, but bad enough. Sergeant Farron, Corporal Watts, and I are the principal losers, besides Sergeant Dawson. Three of the men who went into the Agency on pass just after we were paid had left most of their money with me, and that is gone. I had it with my own in the flat wallet I always carried in the inside pocket of my hunting-shirt. You can see, sir, how it was done," and the sergeant displayed a long clean cut through the Indian tanned buckskin. "It took a sharp knife and a light

hand to do that, for I m not a heavy sleeper. Farron, Watts, and I were sleeping side by side just over there on the bank, and they heard nothing all the night. But will the lieutenant look at this handkerchief, sir? Is it chloroformed? I feel dull and heavy, as though I had been drugged. He couldn't have got it from me any other way."

Blunt took the bandanna and sniffed it cautiously, and then turned it over and curiously inspected it, There was certainly an odor of chloroform about it—a strong odor.

"Whose is this?" he asked. "I do not remember seeing any of the men wearing one like this."

"None of them own it, sir. I've

asked the whole party but Sergeant Dawson and the men on guard. They have these cheap red things for sale at the store there at the Red Cloud Agency, but none of the troop have I ever seen wearing them; they are too small for neck handkerchiefs. Dawson is out yet, trying to locate the trail. I've sent Robbins for him," and the sergeant looked anxiously away southward, searching the prairie with a world of pain and trouble in his eyes.

"What could possibly have induced the boy to turn scoundrel all at once?" asked the lieutenant. "It will break his old father's heart."

"I can't account for it, sir. He has been as honest and square as a

boy could be ever since his enlistment; but the men tell me that he has been spending a good deal of time over in the post whenever we camped there, and I am afraid, from what Donovan says, that he has been gambling with the young fellows at the band quarters. There's a hard lot in there, I'm told; and the old hands encourage the boys to get all they can out of strangers, and then they turn to and fleece the boys. It is about four hundred dollars he has taken. A man knows that will last but a little while on the frontier, but to a boy it seems a big pile."

Then, rapidly approaching, the bounding hoofs of a troop horse were heard. Blunt eagerly turned and saw Sergeant Dawson gallop-

ing toward them down the north bank. Reining in so suddenly as almost to throw his panting bay upon his haunches, he vaulted lightly to the ground and stood before the lieutenant, his face beaded with sweat and his eyes glaring.

"Which way has he gone? could you tell?"

"Yes, sir, I trailed him out across the prairie yonder for three hundred yards or so. Then he took the Laramie road, and there the hoof tracks are all confused; but I knew he would never keep that line very long, and I'm almost certain I found the place where he turned off—a mile beyond the ford and well over the bluffs."

"Turned south toward the Sidney route?"

"Yes, sir, as though he was going to skirt the road a while, then make for Scott's Bluffs, keeping well west of the Sidney stage route. If he got on that he'd be likely to meet Captain Forrest's troop, sir."

"But you were in charge of the guard, sergeant. How came it that your sentries and you could let a man slip out with his horse and everything? The night was still, and they ought to have heard, even if they couldn't see."

"It was dark as pitch, lieutenant; the new moon was down before eleven o'clock; and as for hearing, the horses were uneasy and stamping or snorting all the while from midnight until two o'clock. Either they sniffed Indians, or the coyotes startled them.

Then, the stream makes such a noise over the rocks, sir; and the lieutenant will remember we had no sentries out across the stream. The Indians couldn't stampede the herd from that direction."

"But how could he get his horse out from the herd without——"

"It wasn't there, sir," broke in the trooper, eager to defend himself against the imputation of carelessness or neglect. "Sergeant Graham will bear me out, sir, that Trumpeter Waller has been allowed to lariat his horse close by where he slept, and sometimes he'd loop the lariat by a light cord to his wrist. The captain allowed it, sir, and I supposed that the lieutenant would not care to change the captain's

orders. Last night he slept, or rather made down his blanket and drove his picket-pin at the lower edge of the bivouac, sir, down there by that point; and Private Donovan tells me he moved still further down after dark. We could hear his horse whinnying a while—he didn't like being so far from the others. It's my belief, sir, he waited until all was quiet, and took some time when I was out on the prairie visiting the sentries to slip up the bank to where Sergeant Graham was sleeping, make his haul of the money, and then ride for all that he was worth as soon as he had got beyond earshot. It was easy enough to slip away through the stream without being heard."

"He has left his saddle-bags, blanket, and everything that was heavy, except his arms, behind him," said Graham moodily.

"And you really think that he has stolen the money and is trying to escape?" questioned the lieutenant.

"Indeed, sir," answered Dawson almost tearfully, "I don't know what to think. I hate to believe it of the boy we were all so fond of, though I used to plague him sometimes, just in fun—but I don't know what else to think. The men say that he has been a little wild at times, since he got from under the old man's care. But I don't know, sir; I wouldn't be apt to know what was going on in the barrack there at Robinson."

CHAPTER VI.

CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE.

BLUNT turned sorrowfully away and began to pace slowly up and down the bank. Near at hand over a little camp-fire his coffee pot was bubbling and hissing enticingly, but even the aroma of his accustomed morning beverage failed to attract him. What was he to do? What could he do? Ordered to remain there to escort the captain safely to Red Cloud, on his return from the court, it was impossible to pursue.

Equally unwise would it be to send a small squad. Waller had taken his life in his hands when he rode away through the night, but he could cross the Rawhide and be in comparative safety, so far as the Indian attack was concerned, by sunrise of this day. Now that daylight had come, Blunt well knew that every stretch of prairie from the Platte to the White River would be thoroughly searched by keen and eager eyes, and death would be the very least that any small party of whites could expect. He knew perfectly well that already he and his little troop were being closely scrutinized from the distant ridges. Had he not seen in the tepees of the Cheyennes, but the week

before, as many as three pairs of binocular field-glasses? and had not Colonel Randall told him they knew their use and value as well as anyone? If there was only some way of getting word to Captain Charlton at Laramie. There ran the single wire of the military telegraph, but there was neither office nor station nearer than Red Cloud Agency. No man in the troop would thank him for being ordered to go either way with dispatches, though he knew the order would be obeyed. Silently and gloomily, instead of with their usual cheery alacrity, the men had got to work with their curry-combs and brushes and were touching up their horses while waiting for their own break-

fast; and presently Blunt's orderly came forward, holding a tin cup of steaming coffee.

"Won't the lieutenant drink a little of this, sir, and try a bite of bacon? There isn't much appetite in the troop this morning, sir, but it aint so much because the money's gone. I've known the old sergeant and the boy nigh unto ten years now, sir, an' I never thought it would come to this."

Blunt thanked the soldier and sat down at the edge of the rushing stream, sipping his coffee and trying to think what to do. The drink warmed his blood and cheered him up a trifle. Ordering his horse to be saddled, he mounted and, taking his rifle, rode through the Niobrara and out

upon the open prairie on the other side. It was not long before he found the hoof-tracks made the night before, and, without knowing why, he slowly followed them out toward the low ridge at the southwest. For ten minutes he went at a quiet walk and with downward-searching eyes as he reached the road, striving to decide which hoof-prints were made by Waller's horse.

Suddenly, back at camp he heard the ringing report of a cavalry carbine borne on the rising breeze, and, whirling about, saw that they were signaling to him. Putting spurs to his steed he galloped full tilt for the ford, and then for the first time saw the cause of the excitement. Far up on the opposite slope, and jogging

easily down toward the troop, came an Indian pony and an Indian rider, but not in war-paint and feathers. As Mr. Blunt plunged through the stream he recognized the young half-breed scout known to all of the soldiers as "Little Bat," and Bat, without a word, rode up and handed him a letter. It was from the commanding officer at Fort Robinson, and very much to the point. It read somewhat as follows:

"Captain Charlton telegraphs that he will be detained several days. Meantime you are needed here, as the Indians are again quitting the reservations in large numbers. Move immediately upon receipt of this."

JOGGING ALONG AT AN EASY PACE.

That evening therefore the little troop once more rode down the valley of the White River, the "Smoking Earth" as the Indians called it, and by sunset were camped at Red Cloud. In much distress of mind Mr. Blunt called upon the commanding officer to tell him of the disappearance of the money and his trumpeter, and to ask the colonel's advice as to the proper course for him to pursue. It was agreed that telegrams should be sent at once to the captain at Fort Laramie and to the commanding officer at Sidney barracks on the railway, notifying them of the crime and the desertion. Blunt begged for a moment's delay until he could hear from Sergeant Graham, whom he

had sent to make certain investigations, and long before tattoo the sergeant came—and with him the hospital steward.

"Lieutenant, the store-keeper says he sold just such a handkerchief as that to Trumpeter Waller last week, and the steward can tell about the chloroform."

Both officers looked inquiringly at the steward.

"Yes, sir, it was pay day that young Waller handed me a penciled note from Sergeant Graham, saying that he had a bad toothache and asking for a little chloroform, and I gave it to him."

"I never wrote such a note, sir, and never sent him on such a message," said Graham.

CHAPTER VII.

TELEGRAPHIC DISPATCHES.

BAD news travels fast. Captain Charlton at Fort Laramie was stunned by the tidings flashed to him by telegraph from Red Cloud. Despite the array of damaging evidence, he could not bring himself to believe that Fred Waller was a thief: but he was sore at heart when he thought of the misery and sorrow the news must bring to the dear ones at his army home—above all to the proud old sergeant, whose life seemed al-

most bound up in the boy. Well knowing that it could only be a day or two before the story would make its way to the posts along the railroad, and would reach Sanders, doubtless, in a more exaggerated form, the captain decided to warn his wife at once, and by the stage leaving that very night a letter went in to Cheyenne, and thence by train over the great "divide" of the Rockies to Fort Sanders, giving to Mrs. Charlton all particulars thus far received, but charging her to say nothing until further tidings.

"I cannot believe it [wrote he], and am going at once to join the troop and make full investigation. Meantime I have written by the

same mail to Major Edwards, who commands at Sidney barracks, to make every effort to trace the boy, should he have come south of the Platte; and you must be sure to see, when the news reaches Sanders, that the sergeant is assured of my disbelief in the whole story, and of my determination that Fred shall have justice done him. It will be several days before you can hear from me again."

And the news reached Sanders, as he feared, all too soon. Telegraph offices "leaked" on the frontier in those days. The operators at the military stations were all enlisted men, who were not bound by the regulations of the

Western Union, and who could not keep to themselves every item of personal interest. The Sidney office wired mysterious inquiries to Sanders; Sanders insisted on knowing what it meant, and presently Laramie, Sanders, Sidney, Russell, Red Cloud, and even Chug Water were clicking away in confidential discussion over the extraordinary theft and flight. And Mrs. Charlton's letter came none too early to save old Waller from despair. It was a woman, a gabbling laundress, who first told him of the rumor, and Mrs. Charlton saw him hastening to the telegraph office just as she had finished reading the letter.

"Mr. Nelson, quick!" she called to a young officer just passing the

gate. "Stop Sergeant Waller at once. Don't let him go to the office. Make him come here to me. He will hear and obey you."

And Mr. Nelson touched his cap, leaped lightly across the acequia, and his powerful young voice was heard thundering, "Sergeant Waller!" in peremptory tones across the parade. "Sergeant Waller!" echoed a half dozen voices as the loungers on barrack porches took up the cry, "Lieutenant Nelson wants you!" and the soldier instinct prevailed, the old man turned and hastened toward the officers' quarters.

"What is it, Mrs. Charlton," asked Nelson. "Has there been another fight? Is Fred killed? It will break the old man's heart."

"Oh, Mr. Nelson! I can't tell you about it yet!" she almost wailed. "There's bad news, and I'm afraid the old man has heard it. Stay here, near me a moment, can you? Oh, look at his face! Look at his face! He has heard."

White, livid, trembling from head to foot, the old soldier hurried toward the young officer and dumbly raised his hand in the mechanical salute.

"It is Mrs. Charlton who wants you, sergeant," said Mr. Nelson kindly. "Go to her," and without a word the veteran passed in at the gate.

She held forth her hand, her eyes brimming with tears. Instinctively he halted, the old respect and reverence for "captain's

HE RAISED HIS HANDS AND PRESSED THEM TO HIS EYES.

lady" checking the wild torrent of grief and anxiety, but she caught him by the arm and led him wondering and submissive, yet overwhelmed with cruel dread, into her cool and darkened parlor. There, with wild, imploring eyes, the old man half stretched forth two palsied hands, his forage cap falling unheaded to the floor, his whole frame shaking.

"Don't give way, sergeant; don't believe it!" she cried, and at her first words a look as of horror came into the stricken old face, and the hands clasped together in piteous appeal. "Listen to what the captain says. His letter has just come, and I was sure, when I saw you, that someone had told you the rumor. Captain Charl-

ton will not believe a word of it. He was at Laramie on court-martial or it would not have happened. He has hurried back to Red Cloud to investigate, and he declares that Fred shall have justice done him. I'll never believe it—never! Why, we would trust him with anything we owned."

"I—I thank the captain. I thank Mrs. Charlton," he brokenly replied. "It's stunned like I am." He raised his hands and pressed them against his eyes, and one of them was lowered suddenly, feebly groping for support. She seized his arm and strove to lead him to a sofa. "You must sit down, sergeant," she said.

"No, ma'am, no!" he protested,

straightening himself with a violent effort. "Now, may I hear what it is they say against my boy, ma'am? I want every word. Don't be afraid, ma'am, I can bear it."

Then, with infinite sympathy and pity, she told him, softening every detail, suggesting an explanation for every circumstance that pointed to his guilt; and all the time the old man stood there, his eyes, filled with dumb anguish, fixed upon her face, his hands clasped together as though in entreaty, his fingers twitching nervously. At every new and damaging detail, condone or explain it though she would, he shuddered as though smitten with a sharp, painful spasm; but when

it came to Fred's midnight disappearance—horse, arms, and all—in the heart of the Indian country, stealing away from his comrades in the shadow of disgrace and crime, the old man groaned aloud and buried his face in his hands. Some time he stood there, reeling, yet resisting her efforts to draw him to a seat. She pleaded with him hurriedly, impulsively, yet he seemed not to hear. At last with one long shivering sigh, he suddenly straightened up and faced her. His hands fell by his side, He cleared his throat and strove to speak:

"You've been good to me, ma'am—so good"—and here he choked, and for a moment could not go on—"and to my boy"—at

last he finished, with impulsive rush of words. "I know how they're sometimes tempted. I know how, more than once, the little fellow would be led away by the roughs in the troop, just to worry me; but he never hid a thing from me, ma'am, never; and if he's in trouble now he would tell me the whole truth, even if it broke us both down. I'll not believe it till I see him, ma'am; but I must go—I must go until I find my boy."

Blinded with tears, Mrs. Charlton could hardly see the swaying, grief-bowed old soldier as he left the house; but Nelson was waiting close at hand, and stepped forward and took his place by the sergeant's side.

"I don't know what the trouble is," he said, "but I'm going as far as the headquarters with you, and if there is anything on earth I can do to help you, do not fail to tell me."

That night, with a week's furlough and a letter from his post commander to Major Edwards at Sidney, old Sergeant Waller was jolting eastward in the caboose of a freight train.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOYAL FRIENDS.

IT was on Friday morning, at daybreak, that the desertion of Trumpeter Waller was reported to Lieutenant Blunt. It was Friday night that the telegrams were sent to Laramie and that Charlton's letter left by stage. It was Saturday afternoon just before parade that the mail was distributed at Fort Sanders; and that very evening, before Major Edwards had received and had time to read his letter from the

West, the sergeant had started on his long and fatiguing journey. All night long in sleepless misery he sat in a corner of the caboose, occasionally rising and tramping unsteadily to and fro. At Cheyenne a delay of half an hour occurred, and he left the train and paced restlessly up and down the platform under the freight sheds. He dared not go down to the lighted offices and the crowded passenger station just below him. It seemed as though everyone knew of Fred's story by this time. He could see the gleam of forage-cap ornaments and the glint of army buttons among the people at the dépot, and knew there were several officers and soldiers there. Never before had he known what

it was to shrink from facing any man on earth; but to-night, though he almost starved for further news from his boy, he could not bring himself to meet them and ask.

Along toward morning, at Pine Bluffs, a herdsman got aboard, and what he had to say was of startling interest. Hitherto the Indian war parties had kept well to the north of the Platte, "but" said he, "ever since Friday the Sidney road has been swarming with them—both sides of the river—and they are killing everything white they can lay their hands on."

"My God!" thought Waller, "and Fred must be in the very midst of them. Better so," he added, "if indeed he can be

guilty." The herder had evidently been sorely frightened by all he heard, and he was hurrying to Sidney to join a party of cattlemen who were camping there. He had been drinking too, and took more and more as the night wore on, and became maudlin in his talk. It was nine o'clock on Sunday morning when they reached Sidney station, and the first thing that old Waller saw was a strong concord wagon with a four-mule team and an army driver. Two infantry soldiers with their rifles and girt with cartridge-belts were standing close at hand. Two officers were stowing their rifles inside the wagon, and an orderly was strapping the tarpaulin over the light luggage in the

"boot." One of the officers the sergeant knew instantly—an aid-de-camp of the commanding general. The other was older in years and bore on his cap the insignia of the staff. The younger officer saw him before he could step into the office, and Sergeant Waller knew it—knew too, with the quickness of thought, that he had heard of Fred's disappearance and presumable crime. He could have shrunk from meeting his superiors in the shadow of this bitter sorrow and disgrace. Even while he could not accept the belief that his boy was actually a deserter and a thief, he knew full well what other men must think. But Captain Cross was a cavalryman himself, and had known old Waller

for years. He dropped his rifle, came straight forward, and took him by the hand.

"Sergeant, I don't believe it of your boy; I've known his father too long," was all he said, as he pressed the veteran's hand. Poor old Waller, worn with anguish, long vigil, and utter lack of food of any kind, was now so weak that he could only, with the utmost difficulty, choke back the sobs that shook his frame. Speak he dare not; he would have broken down. Cross led him to the lunch room at the station and made him swallow a cup of coffee, then gently questioned him as to what he knew.

"We go at once to Red Cloud —Colonel Gaines and I — and

maybe on the road I shall hear something of him. Sergeant, rest assured your son shall have fair play," said the aid-de-camp, as he was about to turn away.

"But, captain—I beg pardon, sir," broke in Waller hurriedly, in almost the first words he had spoken. "Where is your escort? Surely you won't take this route without one?"

"There isn't a trooper at Sidney, sergeant. We have a couple of infantrymen in the wagon and another on a mule. That's the best we can do, and we've got no time to spare. We must be at Red Cloud to-morrow, and this is the shortest line."

"But, sir, haven't you heard? The Sioux are out in force and

all along the road, both above and below the Platte. There's a herder on the train who told us. He got aboard at Pine Bluffs this morning."

"I can hardly believe that," answered Cross. "Captain Forrest with the Grays is scouting south of Red Cloud. Captain Wallace was ordered to watch the fords along the Platte on this line; Captain Charlton is out—or at least the whole troop has been, and there are three more. Surely Major Edwards would know over at the barracks, if the Indians were anywhere between us and the river,—we'll get an escort from Captain Wallace the other side,—but he has not heard a word."

"But I beg the captain to hear what the man says, sir," urged Sergeant Waller. "He's been drinking, but he tells the same story, practically, that he told us when he got aboard. Let me find him, sir."

And find him he did, even more maudlin and thick-tongued by this time, and evidently determined to make the most of his dramatic story for the benefit of the two officers and swarm of interested lookers-on. He only succeeded in inspiring the colonel with mingled incredulity and disgust.

"I don't believe a word of it," he said to Captain Cross. "And we are losing valuable time. We must start at once."

An hour later this peaceful Sabbath morning, the sergeant stood, cap in hand, before Major Edwards on the veranda of his pleasant quarters. Two pretty children were playing with a big, shaggy, lazy staghound, pulling his ears and tormenting him in various ways; a pleasant-faced lady came forth, sunshade and prayer book in hand, and at sight of her the little ones reluctantly rose and bade good-by to their four-footed friend, and the party started slowly away across the green parade to the post chapel, nodding and smiling to the spruce orderly, who stood respectfully aside to let them pass. Mrs. Edwards glanced quickly and sympathetically into the ser-

geant's sad face as he stood there before her husband's easy-chair. She knew well what it all meant, but there was nothing for her to say. Small parties of infantry officers and of ladies and children joined them on the way to the humble wooden sanctuary; the soft notes of the bugle were sounding church call; a warm gentle breeze from the southern plains stirred the folds of the big flag; the sunshine was joyous and brilliant, and all spoke of peace, order, and contentment. Yet there stood Waller with almost bursting heart; and yonder, only a few miles across the grassy ridge to the north, rode that little party of officers and men to almost certain death.

The major looked up as he finished reading the letter placed in his hands.

"I have no words to tell you of my sympathy and sorrow, sergeant. Of course you know my plain duty in the matter. The sheriff has been notified, and two of his deputies already have gone out to search. He would hardly be mad enough to come anywhere near us, if guilty. But if he is taken he will be held here under my charge, and I will see that you have every proper opportunity of visiting him. The adjutant tells me you had heard something of the Indians being south of the Platte. What was it?"

"A man who boarded our train at the Bluffs, sir. He claimed to

have had to ride hard for his life yesterday afternoon, and that there were scores of the Sioux this side of the river. I took him to Colonel Gaines and Captain Cross, sir; but the man had been drinking so much that they distrusted him entirely. They left the station before I started for the barracks, sir."

The major sat thoughtfully gazing out across the parade a moment; then answered:

"We have had no rumors of anything of the kind, and they would be almost sure to come this way to us, if anyone heard of such stories. There are no settlers along the road, after leaving the springs, out here until you reach the Platte. I can hardly believe

it, but we'll see what can be got from the man when he sobers up. Now the sergeant-major will go with you to the quarters, and I will see you later in the day."

But later in the day that promise was forgotten in an excitement of far greater magnitude.

CHAPTER IX.

LURKING FOES.

CHURCH was over. The bugler had just sounded mess call, and the soldiers in their neat "undress" uniform were just going in to dinner, when a man on a "cow pony"—one of those wiry, active little steeds so much in use around the cattle-herd—came full speed into the garrison and threw himself from the saddle at Major Edwards' gate. It was the telegraph operator at the railway station. In his hands were two

brown envelopes, and Major Edwards, as he stepped forward to meet him, saw in his face the tell-tale look of a bearer of bad news.

"I've no idea whose horse that is, major. There were a half dozen of 'em in front of a saloon there in town, and I jumped on the first I saw. These have just come—one from Laramie, one from Omaha. I dropped everything at the office to fetch them to you."

Edwards tore open first one and then the other. The first read:

"Couriers in front of Captain Wallace report large war parties along the Platte, and some across, raiding the Sidney road. Four

teamsters killed, scalped, and mutilated three miles south of river. Bodies found. Warn back everybody attempting to go that way."

The second was from the office of the department commander himself:

"Indians in force south of Platte, on Sidney road. If Colonel Gaines and Captain Cross have started, send couriers at once to recall them."

The major's face was dark with dismay.

"They have been gone nearly four hours," he exclaimed. "Even if I had swift riders ready, who could catch them in time?"

"I've been a trooper all my life, sir," came sudden answer. "Give me a horse and carbine and let me go."

The major might have known 'twas Sergeant Waller.

True to his word, and arranging with the officers of the court-martial to return in case his further testimony was required, Captain Charlton set forth at daybreak on Saturday, intending to push straight through to Red Cloud as fast as mules could drag or horses bear him. To the Niobrara crossing the road was hard and smooth, when once they cleared the sandy wastes of the Platte bottom. He had a capital team, a light ambulance, and a

little squad of seasoned troopers to go with him as escort. It was a drive of nearly ninety miles, but he proposed resting his animals an hour at the Niobrara, another hour at sunset; feeding and watering carefully each time, and so keeping on to the old Agency until he reached his troop late at night.

No danger was to be apprehended until the party got beyond the Rawhide, and not very much until they were across the Niobrara, but Charlton and his half a dozen troopers had been over each inch of the ground time and again, and very little did they dread the Sioux.

After midday the little party had halted close beside the spot

where Blunt's detachment had made their bivouac so short a time before. Here were the ashes of their cook-fires and the countless hoof-prints of the horses. Here, too, was the trail in double file, leading away northward across the prairie—a short cut to the Red Cloud road. Charlton followed it with his keen eyes, and noted with a smile how straight a line its young leader must have made for the "dip" in the grassy ridge a mile away, through which ran the hard, beaten track. Blunt prided himself on these little points of soldiership, as the captain well remembered, and when charged with guiding at the head of a column, was pretty sure to fix his eyes on

some distant landmark and steer for that, with little regard for what might be going on at the rear.

The ambulance mules, tethered about the tongue, were busily crunching their liberal measure of oats. Each cavalry horse, too, buried his nose deep in the shimmering pile his rider had carefully poured for him upon the dry side of the saddle-blanket. The men were contentedly eating their hard-tack and bacon and drinking their coffee from huge tin cups with the relish of old frontiersmen. One trooper, a few yards away out on the prairie, kept vigilant watch. Pondering deeply over the strange and unaccountable charge that had been laid at his young trumpeter's door, the captain was

slowly pacing down the bank, puffing away at the briar root pipe that was the constant companion of his scouting days. Suddenly he heard the sentry call, and, turning, saw him pointing to the ground at his feet.

"What is it, Horton?" he asked, going over toward him.

"Pony tracks, sir. The Indians have been nosing around here since our men left."

There were the prints of some half a dozen little unshod hoofs dotting the sandy hollows in the low ground near the stream, and easily traceable among the clumps of buffalo grass beyond. Charlton could see where they had gathered in one spot, as though their riders were then in consulta-

tion, and then scattered once more along the bank. Two hundred yards away stood the lonely log cabin, all that was left of what had been the ranch, and following the trail, the captain presently found himself nearing it. Two tracks seemed to lead straight thither, and before he reached it were joined by several more. Close to the abandoned hut the ground was worn smooth and hard; yet in the hollows were accumulations of dust blown from the roadway up the stream. Around here the pony tracks were thick, and just within the gaping doorway were footprints in the dust—some of spurred bootheels and broad soles, one still more recent of Sioux moccasins. Through the solid log

walls two small square windows had been cut and narrow slits for rifles, in the days when the occupants had frequent occasion to defend their prairie castle. The opening to the subterranean "keep" was yawning under the eastern wall, its wooden cover having long since been broken up for fuel. Charlton stood for a moment within the blackened and dusty doorway, and glanced curiously around him.

Except for the new footprints it looked very much as it did when he had first taken occasion to inspect the interior, earlier in the summer. There was nothing left that anyone could carry away, and he wondered why the Indians should have troubled themselves

to dismount and prowl about. An Indian hates a house on general principles, and enters one only when he expects to make something by it. Those recent boot-prints, nearly effaced by the moccasins, were doubtless those of some of Blunt's party. Curiosity had prompted some time-killing trooper to stroll out here and take a look at the place. The sunshine streaming in at the open doorway made a brilliant oblong square upon the earthen floor and lighted up the grimy interior. The steps cut down to the dark "dugout" were crumbling away, and it was impossible to see more than a few feet into the passage leading to the underground fortress, where as a final resort in an

Indian siege the little garrison could take refuge. A lantern or a candle would show the way, but Charlton had neither. Taking out his match-case, however, he bent down, struck a light, and peered in. Somebody had done the same thing within the last day or two, for there were the stub ends of two matches just like his in the dust at the bottom of the steps, and there, too—yes, he lighted another match and studied it carefully—there was the print of cavalry boots going in and coming out again. Whoever was his predecessor, he had more curiosity than the captain. Charlton had seen prairie "dugout" forts before, and did not care to waste time now.

CHAPTER X.

IN SUSPENSE.

RETURNING to the open sunshine he made the circuit of the house, and on the north side stopped and studied with an interest he had not felt before. A stout post was still standing on that side, and to the post a cavalry horse had been tethered within two days, and stood there long enough to paw and trample the gravel all around it. Charlton was cavalryman enough to read in every sign

that the steed had been most unwillingly detained. In evident impatience he had twisted twice and again around that stubborn bullet-scarred stump, and the troop commander could almost see him, pawing vigorously, tugging at his "halter-shank," and plunging about his hated but relentless jailer, and neighing loudly in hopes of calling back his departing friends. Charlton felt sure that, as the troop rode away, some one of the men had remained here some little time.

A hundred yards across the prairie was the "double file" trail of the detachment on its straight line for the ridge, and here, only a little distance out, were the hoof-prints of a troop horse both com-

ing and going. Even more interested now, the captain went some distance out across the prairie, and still he found them. Leaving the hut and following to overtake the troop, the horse had instantly taken the gallop; the prints settled that. But what struck Captain Charlton as strange was that the other tracks, those which were made by the same horse in coming to the hut, were still to be found far out toward the northeast. It was evident, then, that the rider had not turned back from the command until it had marched some distance from the Niobrara; that he had not gone back to the bank where they had been in camp, as would have been the case had he lost or left some

thing behind, but had come here to this abandoned hovel south-east of the trail. Now, what did that mean? One other thing the captain did not fail to note; that horse had cast a shoe.

Late as it was when he reached the camp on White River that night—after midnight, as it proved—Charlton found his young lieutenant up, and anxiously awaiting him. When the horses had all been cared for, and the two officers were alone near their tents, almost the first question asked by the captain was:

"Did you give any man permission to ride back after you left the Niobrara Friday morning?

"No, sir," answered Blunt in some surprise. "No one asked,

and every man was in his place when we made our first halt."

Immediately after reveille on Sunday morning, a good hour before the sun was high enough to peep over the tall white crags to the east of the little camp, the two officers were out at the line, superintending the grooming of the horses. Fifty men were now present for duty, and fifty active steeds were tethered there at the picket rope, nipping at each other's noses or nibbling at the rope itself, and pricking up their ears as the captain stopped to pat or to speak to one after another of his pets. Always particularly careful of his horses, Captain Charlton on this bright sunshiny morning was noting especially the condition of

their feet. Every one of those two hundred hoofs were keenly scrutinized as he passed along the line. But there was nothing unusual in this—he never let a week go by without it.

"You seem to have had a number reshod within the last few hours, sergeant," he said to Graham, as he stopped at the end of the line.

"Yes, sir, I looked them all over yesterday morning. Every shoe is snug and ready now, in case we have to go out. Seven horses were reshod yesterday, and over twenty had the old shoes tacked on."

Grooming over, each trooper vaulted on to the bare back of his horse and rode in orderly

column down to the running stream, and still Charlton stood there, silently watching his men and noting the condition of their steeds. Blunt was bustling about his duties, every now and then looking over at his soldierly captain. Something told him that the troop commander had made a discovery or two that had set him to thinking. He was even more silent than usual.

At seven o'clock, after a refreshing dip in a pool under the willows close at hand, the two officers were seated on their camp-stools and breakfasting at the lid of the mess chest. Over among the brown buildings of the post, half a mile away, the

bugles were sounding mess call and the infantry people were waking up to the duties of the day. Down the valley, still farther to the east, the smoke was curling from the tiny fires among the Indian tepees, and scores of ponies were grazing out along the slopes, watched by little urchins in picturesque but dirty tatters. All was very still and peaceful. Even the hulking squaws and old men loafing about the Agency store-houses were silent, and patiently waiting for the coming of the clerk with his keys of office. One or two young braves rode by the camp, shrouded in their dark-blue blankets, and apparently careless of any change in

the condition of affairs, yet never failing to note that there were fifty horses and soldiers ready for duty there in camp.

Their breakfast finished, Charlton said that he must go at once to the office of the post commander over in garrison, and that he might be detained some hours. "It will be well to keep the men here, Blunt, for we may be needed any moment."

And yet, as he was riding away with his orderly, Charlton stopped to listen to what Sergeant Graham had to say.

"Sergeant Dawson and Private Donovan wanted particularly to go over to the post for a few hours this morning, and so did some of the others, but I told

them that the captain's orders were we should all stay at camp, we were almost sure to be wanted. They were all satisfied, sir, but Dawson and Donovan, who made quite a point of it, and I said I would carry their request to the captain." And to Blunt's surprise, as well as that of Sergeant Graham, the captain coolly nodded.

"Very well. They've both been doing hard work of late. Tell them to keep their ears open for 'boots and saddles'; otherwise they may stay until noon. After dinner, perhaps, I will give others a chance to turn."

Fifteen minutes later Captain Charlton was in consultation with the post commander, and after

guard mounting they returned to the colonel's house, where a tall infantry soldier, the provost sergeant, was awaiting him.

CHAPTER XI.

HEMMED IN BY SAVAGE FOES.

BACK at the cavalry camp there was no little subdued chat and wonderment among the troopers. Lounging in the shade of the trees along the stream, and puffing away at their pipes, playing cards, as soldiers will, and poking fun at one another in rough, good-natured ways, the men were yet full of the one absorbing theme—Fred Waller's most unaccountable disappearance and the loss of so much of their hard-earned money.

"I would have bet any amount," said Corporal Wright, "that when the old man"—the captain is always the "old man" to his troops—"got back he would ride over Sergeant Dawson roughshod for letting Waller slip away on his guard; but I listened to him this morning and he talked to him just like a Dutch uncle. I tell you Dawson felt a heap better after it was over. He said the captain never blamed him at all."

Noon came, so did an orderly telling Mr. Blunt that the captain wished to see him over at the telegraph office, and to order the horses fed at once. Forty-eight big portions of oats were poured from the sacks forthwith. Dawson and Donovan were not yet back.

"Leave theirs out," said Sergeant Graham, "they'll be back presently. This means business again, and no mistake. Where's the trouble now, I wonder?"

Shall we look and see? Far to the south, far beyond the bold bluffs of the White River, far beyond the swift waters of the Niobrara,—"L'Eau qui Court" of the old French trapper,—far across the swirling flood of the North Platte, and dotting the northward slopes, swarms of naked, brilliantly painted red warriors in their long, trailing war bonnets of eagle's feathers are darting about on nimble ponies, or, crouching prone along the ridges, are eagerly watching a dust-cloud coming northward on the Sidney road.

Behind them, between them and the Platte, are the weltering mutilated bodies of half a dozen herders and teamsters, and the smoking ruins of their big freight-wagons. Like the tiger's taste of blood, the savage triumph in the death of their hapless foes has tempted them far beyond their accustomed limits. Knowing the cavalry to be scouting only north of the Platte, they have made a wide detour and swooped around to this danger-haunted road, eagerly watching for the coming of other white men, who, like the last, should be ignorant of their presence and too few in number to cope with such a foe. Here along the ridge north of the little "Branch" of the Platte, half a

hundred young warriors crouch and wait. Farther back, equally vigilant, other bands are hiding among the breaks and ravines near the river, while their scouts keep vigilant watch for the coming of cavalry. Forrest's Grays and Wallace's Sorrels cannot be more than a day's ride away, and will be hurrying for the road the moment they know that the Indians have slipped around them. Wallace, up the Platte, has already heard.

It is three o'clock this hot, still Sunday afternoon, and they have been six hours out from Sidney, driving swiftly and steadily northward, when, as they reach the summit of a high ridge and stop to breathe their panting team,

Colonel Gaines takes a long look through his field glass. Just in front is the shallow valley of the little stream now called the "Pumpkinseed" though pumpkins were unheard-of features in the landscape of fifteen years ago.

Off to their right front, several miles away, lie the low, broad bottom lands of the Platte. Across the Pumpkinseed, a mile distant, another ridge, like the one on which they halted, only not so high; to the westward a tumbling sea of prairie upland—all buttes, ridges, ravines, coulées—but not a living soul is anywhere in sight. Far as his practiced eye can sweep the horizon and the broad lowlands of the Platte not a sign of living, moving object can Colonel

Gaines detect. Turning around, he trains his glass upon the tortuous road they had been following, and along which the dust is slowly settling in their wake. Something seems to attract his gaze, for he holds the binocle steadily toward the south. Naturally Captain Cross and the two soldiers follow with their eyes; the third infantryman has dismounted, and is readjusting the girths of his saddle.

"What is it?" asks Cross.

"I can't make out," is the reply, "Something is kicking up a dust there, some miles behind us. A horseman, I should say, though I've seen nobody. Wait a few minutes. He's down in a swale now, whoever it is."

Everybody turns to look and

HE TOOK A LONG LOOK THROUGH HIS GLASSES

listen. Those were days when such a thing as a single horseman following in pursuit had a meaning that is lacking now.

Three, four minutes they wait in silence; then the colonel suddenly exclaims:

"I have him—a mere dot yet!"

Presently he lowers his glasses, and dusts the lenses with his handkerchief. His face is graver.

"Whoever that is, he is riding for all he is worth," he says. "I half believe he wants to catch us."

Another long look. Utter silence in the party. A mule in the wheel team gives an impatient shake of his entire system, and chains, tugs, and swing-bars all rattle noisily.

"Quiet there, you fool!" growls

the driver angrily, and with a threatening sweep of his long whip-lash. Then the silence becomes intense again, and every man strains his eyes over the prairie slopes shimmering in the heat of the July sun. Suddenly an exclamation bursts from two or three pairs of bearded lips. Far away, but in plain sight in that rare atmosphere, a speck of a horseman darts into view over a distant ridge, sweeps down the slope at full gallop, and plunges out of sight again in a low dip of the rolling surface.

"No man rides like that unless there is mischief abroad," mutters Cross, as he swings out of the wagon to the ground. "Give me my rifle, Murray."

Then, sudden as thunderclap from summer sky, with wild, shrill clamor, with thunder of hoofs, and sputter of rapid shots; with yell and taunt and hideous war cry, from the very ground itself, from behind every little ridge; up from the ravines, down from the prairie buttes; hurling upon them in mad, raging race, there flashes into sight of their startled eyes a horde of painted savages.

"The Sioux! The Sioux!" yells the driver, as he leaps from his box.

"Hang on to your mules!" shouts Cross. "Down with you, men! Fire slow! They'll veer when they get in closer. Now!"

Bang! goes Cross' piece. Bang! bang! the rifles of the

nearest soldiers. The mules plunge wildly, and are tangled in an instant in the traces. Over goes the wagon with a crash. Bang goes Gaines' big Springfield as he coolly spreads himself on the ground. An Indian pony stumbles and hurls his rider on the turf, and Cross gives an exultant cheer. Yet all the same he knows full well that now it is life or death. The little party is hemmed in by a host of savage foes.

CHAPTER XII.

MYSTERIOUS HOOF-PRINTS.

IT was Saturday night that, from far up the Platte, the news came to Captain Wallace of the dash made by the Sioux for the Sidney road. For two days previous he had been hunting Indians upstream toward the Rawhide, and had found a perfect network of pony tracks and had had some very distant glimpses of flitting warriors. His scouts had told him that the Sioux and Cheyennes were swarming over the

country to the northwest of him, and that none had appeared to the east. It was his business, therefore, to move against them, and move he did, trusting that Forrest and the Grays would be alert along the southern verge of the reservations that no formidable parties could slip southward in his absence.

But this was simply part and parcel of the Indian scheme. Having lured him two days' march away from the Sidney crossing, these enterprising warriors kept him occupied, while their confederates, making a wide detour around Forrest, slipped across the Platte and swooped down upon the poor fellows with the freight wagons. Only one of their num-

ber managed to escape, and he, madly riding westward, came upon some herdsmen who promptly joined him in his flight. They had seen the cavalry going up the north bank a day or two before, and they never drew rein until they found them. Wallace at once sent couriers westward to Fort Laramie with the news, and at break of day started downstream with his whole troop. They had not marched five miles before they came upon the hoofprints of a single horse, and just beyond the point where these hoofprints crossed their trail, the tracks of half a dozen Indian ponies met their eager eyes. One old sergeant, reining out of column to the right, followed the shod tracks

over to the river bank, and a lieutenant spurred out and joined him when he signaled with his broad-brimmed scouting hat. The rest of the troop moved stolidly ahead.

Presently the young officer overtook the column and reined in beside his captain.

"Where did they go, Park?"

"Straight into the stream, sir, and evidently to the other side. Sergeant Brooks says 'twas a troop horse with a light rider, and that he had to swim across. The river is six feet deep out there, but it was his only way of escape. The Indians couldn't have been far behind, and yet they didn't follow. Their tracks turn down the bank on this side. Brooks is following them now."

"Who on earth could have come through here at such a time? Why, the country has been running over with Indians!"

"That's what puzzles me, sir, but Brooks says there is no mistake. It's the cavalry shoe, of course. It's just after pay day at Robinson. Could it have been a deserter?"

"No man in his senses would have dared such a thing," is the impatient answer. "It may be some other infernal trick to get us away from our legitimate business. What we've got to do is reach that Sidney road by sunset. By Jove! if I'm court-martialed for this business, it won't surprise me." And the captain's horse evidently felt the sudden grip of the knees, for

he took a sudden spurt and set most of the troop at the nerve-wearing jog-trot. Mr. Park said nothing more, but for the life of him he could not help thinking of those lone hoofprints and of that solitary rider. Who could he be?

It is time we got back to him. Only one man or boy, known to us at least, could have come that way. It was Trumpeter Fred.

Daybreak Friday had found him a few miles south of the Niobrara, and close to the Laramie road. At noon Friday he had halted at the Rawhide to rest his horse and take a bite of luncheon, but all his young soul was athrill with eagerness; every faculty was alert. Warned of the recent presence of Indians on every side, he was yet

seeking to gain the Platte before nightfall; cross to the south bank, where there was comparative safety; ride southeastward until his horse was exhausted, picket him where grass and water were near at hand, sleep till dawn again, and then push on. He must reach the Sidney road before Sunday morning and strike it far below the river.

But here, as he neared the valley, a sight had met his eyes which made his young heart leap. The banks of the Rawhide were dotted here and there by fresh pony tracks, and, coming from the distant ridges to the east, they had gone in as though to water, and then turned down toward the Platte, the very way he wanted to

go. An hour, with his horse hidden behind him in a shallow ravine, Fred Waller was lying prone upon the ground, and peering over a ridge into the low, level wastes stretching far to the south-east, bordering the Platte to the very horizon. What most attracted his gaze was a little dust cloud, miles away downstream, into which tiny black dots were moving, with other little dots scurrying about at some distance from the main cluster. No need to tell him they were Indians.

It was some minutes before he could determine which way they were really going, but when he finally saw that they were bound down the valley, the boy's heart beat high with hope. He could

FLAT ON THE GROUND WAS PEERING OVER THE RIDGE.

venture down to the Platte as soon as they had passed entirely out of sight, and find some place to cross well to the west of them. An hour he waited and still they were in view. Then they seemed to disappear in a little clump of timber. He waited fifteen to twenty minutes, and they were still there. Then it suddenly dawned upon him that the whole band were resting in the shade while their scouts searched the neighborhood. He was five or six miles from the river, and every inch of ground in front was open. He knew well that their eyes were keener than his, and should he make a dash for it they would certainly see and give chase. What he could not detect, and did not dream of, was

that miles still further away down the Platte another dust cloud was slowly advancing—Wallace's troop coming upstream—and their scouts were watching that.

At last, after another hour of anxiety, he determined to slip away westward, go up the Rawhide a few miles until he could gain the shelter of some low-lying ridges, crossing the stream, and making a wide circuit, sweep around to the Platte. He might still reach it before dark and find a ford, or at least a place to swim across; he could trust "Big Jim" for that. But even as he would have put this plan in execution, he saw to his dismay a new move among the warriors. Four little dots came riding from the timber

and pushing back up the valley. These were only the advance. In half an hour the whole band came jogging leisurely out of the shadows, and little dots farther east came streaking across the flats to join them. Fred saw that the whole war party was now retracing its steps and coming back upstream, and that now, if he waited, he might pursue his original intention of crossing at the shallows, ten miles below the mouth of the Rawhide. And so, patiently and pluckily, he kept his ground,—"Big Jim" contentedly filling himself with buffalo grass the while,—and not until the sun was low in the west did Fred realize their real intent. Just as the scouts, far in advance of the

main party, reached the winding banks of the Rawhide, they seemed to hold brief consultation; one of them plunged through to the western side, the other three turned and came straight toward the watching boy.

Great Heavens! It meant that the whole party was coming up the Rawhide, and before dark would find and follow his track. Fred's first impulse was to mount, and giving Jim the spurs, ride on the wings of the wind back to the north —back to the Niobrara, where he had left the troop in bivouac. There at least was safety, for they could not trail him in the dark. But the second thought covered him with shame. Go back—go back now! Never, so long as he

had a chance for life and hope. Away from here, and instantly, he must speed on his mission, and in another moment his girth was tightened, and "Big Jim," astonished, was racing away eastward, but keeping the sheltered ridge between him and the Platte.

CHAPTER XIII.

AWAY TO THE RESCUE!

THAT night Fred Waller slept fitfully on the open prairie, with "Big Jim" tethered close at hand. Saturday morning found him ten miles to the east and ten miles further from the river than the point where he watched the Sioux the previous evening. Hungry and worn with anxiety as he was, the poor boy's heart sank within him when he cautiously peered over the ridge into the valley. After an early

morning ride, he saw the dust clouds near the stream, and felt that he was still cut off. Noon was near when, far as he could see up or down, the valley was clear; and then creeping out from his lair, he again mounted and rode straight for the Platte. Warily he watched in every direction, but no intruders came. He was spurring over the flats only a mile from the river before the first sign of pursuit was made. Then, far back toward the bluffs he had left, Fred spied a little party of warriors coming after him full tilt. Never stopping for more than one glance he gave Jim the rein, urging him to full speed; marked, as he flashed across it only a few hundred yards

from the bank, the trail of a cavalry command going up the valley and wondered whose it could be; then he and Jim went crashing through the gravel at the water's edge and plunged boldly into the running stream. Deeper and deeper brave old Jim pushed in until the waters foamed about his broad and muscular breast; then Fred threw himself from the saddle, and keeping tight hold of the pommel and steadying his carbine with the same hand, "Swim for it, old man!" he shouted to his gallant horse, and in another minute he and Jim were floating with the current, yet rapidly nearing the other shore. Three minutes and, dripping wet but safe, they were scrambling up the

south bank and speeding away over the bounding turf with the baffled pursuers still two miles behind.

And these were the tracks that Wallace found as he came hurrying back downstream.

Saturday again Fred Waller and his faithful horse spent on the open prairie, for in the darkness he found it impossible to make his way. The moon was gone by one o'clock, and her light had been all too faint before. But Sunday, just a little after noon, he had come in sight of the goal he had sought through such infinite pluck and peril—the Sidney road; and as he gazed at it from afar, peering at it as usual from behind a sheltering bluff, his heart sank into his

boots. He had come too late; there on that distant trail were the tiny columns of blue smoke floating skyward which told of burning wagons, now in crumbling ruins. Worse than that, here close at hand, over on the other side of the long, shallow swale, were twoscore Indian warriors in all their barbaric finery, excitedly watching the coming of other victims.

With a moan of anguish Fred Waller marked, a mile beyond and rapidly approaching them, a four-mule ambulance with a single soldier cantering along behind.

"Oh, my God, my God!" he groaned aloud. "I am too late, after all."

But the wagon halted on the

distant hills. The Indians, absorbed in their cat-like watch, were eagerly gesticulating and excitedly pointing to some object far beyond. Several of their numbers lashed their ponies into a tearing gallop and sped away in wide circuit to the southward, keeping the bluffs between them and the wagon. Others followed part of the distance. He knew the maneuver well; already they were planning the surround. In helpless agony he watched, for he was powerless to aid—powerless even to warn. He seized his ready carbine, loosened the cartridges in his belt, and looked eagerly to Jim's girths. Then once again he faced the southeast, and saw, far away across the waves

of prairie, a little puff of dust and a little black dot—a rider—coming full tilt in the wake of the wagon.

"Who can it be?" he wondered. "Can he possibly know of this ambuscade?"

All too late! A sudden flashing signal from the leader, and all at an instant with trailing feathers, with war cry and the thunder of a hundred hoofs, the painted band has whirled across the ridge in front and is down in the dip beyond. Every Indian has vanished from his view and whirled into sight of the victims on the crest beyond.

In an instant, too, Fred Waller is in saddle, and spurring on to the ridge which they have just

left, and then once more he reins in where he can just peer over the crest. He notes with a cheer of joy that the charge is checked—that the Indians have veered off and are now dashing in a great circle around the central point on the height beyond. He sees the wild stampede and tangle of the mules, the overthrow of the ambulance; the quick, cool, resolute reply of the attacked. He marks with a glow of mad delight, of reviving hope, that there is not a woman or child with the party.

"Thank God!" he cries aloud, "It isn't Mrs. Charlton." He waves his hat with exultation as he sees a pony stumbling in death upon the prairie, and his rider

limping painfully away ; he knows now that they are soldiers, holding their own for at least a time, and that all depends on getting aid for them before nightfall. Far up the valley on the other side he had marked at noon a dust-cloud sailing slowly toward him. It must be the Sorrels or the Grays, hastening back to clear the Sidney road. Here is the thing to do: gallop back, recross the river, meet and guide them to the rescue. There is still time to get them here before the sun goes down—if only the besieged can hold out that long.

One more glance he takes at the stirring picture before him, longing to drive a shot at the nearest Indians, and as he gazes

IN FULL FLIGHT.

there comes staggering, laboring into sight from around a point of bluff beyond the beleaguered party, a horse all foam and blood, who goes plunging to earth only a few yards away from the ambulance, and rolls stiffening and quivering in his death agony; but the gray-haired old rider has leaped safely to the ground, and his carbine flashed its instant defiance at the yelling foe. Even at that distance there is no mistaking the well-known form. Fred Waller's wondering eyes have recognized at once — his father.

Now indeed he speeds away for help! Now indeed, has Jim to run for more than life! Turning his back upon the thrilling

scene, the little trumpeter goes like a prairie gale, whirling back to the valley of the Platte.

. . . . .

The sun is sinking behind the bluffs, and its last rays fall on a bullet-riddled ambulance; on the stiffening bodies of a half dozen slaughtered animals—a horse and some mules; on a grim, determined little band of soldiers—two of them sorely wounded. The red shafts gleam on a litter of empty cartridge-shells and tinge the canvas top of the overturned wagon. Out on the rolling prairie several hundred yards away, the turf is dotted here and there by Indian ponies, the innocent victims of this savage warfare. Such Indian braves as have fallen have

long since been picked up by their raging comrades and borne away. Despite their numbers, never once yet have the savages managed to reach the defenders. Time and again they have swooped down in charge only to be met by cool, well-aimed shots that tumbled some of their numbers to the turf and sent the others veering and yelling into the old familiar circle. At last they are trying the expedient of long-range shots from different points of the compass, hoping to kill or cripple the whole party by sundown. The bullets clip the turf and scatter the dust all over the ridge. There is practically no shelter, for the ground is too hard to dig. Old Sergeant Waller is prostrate with a bullet

through the thigh. Colonel Gaines has bound his handkerchief tightly around his arm. The driver lies flat on his face—dead. Every now and then the others turn longing eyes southward, hoping for some sign of infantry coming from the post, so many a mile away. They know well that Edwards will have levied on every wagon in Sidney to bring them; but not a whiff of dust-cloud do they see. One of the soldiers gives a low moan and clasps his hands to his side; and Cross mutters between his set teeth, "Five minutes more of this will settle it."

But what means this sudden scurry and excitement among the besiegers? Why do they crowd

and clamor there at the north? What can they see over that ridge beyond the little stream? Presently others join them. Then more and more. Then there are whoops of rage; a few ill-aimed, scattering shots. Three or four of the red men ride daringly, tauntingly down, as though to resume the attack, and shout vile epithets in vilest English in response to the shots with which they are greeted, and then they too go riding away. "Lie down, you idiots!" yells Captain Cross to the two soldiers who would spring up to cheer, but a moment more and even the wounded wave their feeble hands and join in the triumphant shout. The ridge is cleared of every vestige of the

foe. The warriors go speeding away eastward toward the Platte. Far out over the prairie, to the northeast, a troop of blue horsemen are driving in pursuit, and, over the neighboring crest, come a half dozen friendly forms and faces, spurring their foam-flecked horses in the race.

"Look up, sergeant! Look up, old man! Here's Fred himself. Didn't I tell you he was no deserter?" It was Cross' voice, and it is Cross' strong arm that lifts the wondering, trembling veteran to his feet. The young fellow has leaped from his horse and is springing toward them. With wondrous look of relief, of inexpressible joy, of gratitude beyond all words, of almost Heaven-

born rapture mingling with the sunshine in his old face, the sergeant stretches forth his trembling arms and cries aloud, "My boy! my boy!"

CHAPTER XIV.

INNOCENT OR GUILTY.

THE provost sergeant at Fort Robinson is a man who has seen and heard a great deal in the course of his army life, and who has the enviable faculty of knowing everything that is going on around him, without appearing to know anything at all. It had been his duty, a day or two previous, to expel from the limits of the reservation a rascally pack of gamblers—a species of two-legged prairie wolf

that in the rough old days on the frontier followed every movement of the Army paymasters, and lured and trapped the soldiers until every cent of their money was gone. In point of number the gamblers were strong enough to take care of themselves in case of Indian attack, yet rarely did they venture far from the protection of the nearest troops. Driven out of post and forbidden to return, they had simply camped with their whole "outfit" at the lower edge of the military reservation, where the laws of the State of Nebraska and not the orders of Uncle Sam took precedence. And here they "set up shop" again, and had a game going in full blast this very sunshiny Sun-

day morning, and the provost sergeant knew all about it. He also knew by ten o'clock that Sergeant Dawson and Private Patsy Donovan of Charlton's troop, with some adventurous spirits from the garrison, were down there, "bucking their luck" against the tricks of these skilled practitioners; and it was not hard to predict what the result would be.

"Shall I take a file of the guard and fetch them back, sir?" he asked the colonel commanding, and that gentleman glanced inquiringly at his cavalry friend.

"How say you, captain?" Charlton reflected a moment and then replied:

"No, colonel. I should say let them have all the rope they

choose to take. I can get them when they are needed. You are sure about their whereabouts on Tuesday and Wednesday nights?" he asked, turning to the sergeant.

"Perfectly, sir; and just what they lost and how much they owed the quartermaster's gang when they left."

"Just see where they are at noon then, and let me know," and the provost sergeant went his way, leaving the officers in consultation.

At noon the soldier telegrapher came hurrying to the colonel and handed him a dispatch.

"I feared as much," said the old soldier as he handed the paper to Captain Charlton. "This means work for you at once. Let us go

to the office; there will be dispatches from Omaha presently. Isn't it strange that no one at Sidney should have heard of the Indians getting over the Platte?"

At two o'clock Charlton's troop was in saddle, with only three familiar faces missing from the line. In the new excitement the men had ceased to speak of Trumpeter Fred. What puzzled them now was the absence of Dawson and Donovan. A sergeant sent into the garrison, to warn them that the troop was to march at once, came back to say that he had searched every stable and corral; the horses were nowhere about the post or the Agency stores, and men on guard said that they had seen the two troopers riding away

down White River soon after one o'clock, and they had not come back. And when Graham reported them absent to Captain Charlton, as the latter in his familiar scouting costume rode out to take command, the whole troop was amazed that their leader seemed to treat it as a matter of no consequence whatever. He returned the sergeant's salute and inquired:

"Every horse fed and watered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Every man got two days' hard bread and bacon?"

"Yes, sir."

"How much ammunition?"

"Eighty rounds carbine per man—twenty revolver, sir."

"Very good, sergeant;" and this brief colloquy ended, the sergeant reined about and rode to the right flank. "Prepare to mount—mount!" ordered the captain. "Form ranks!" and without further delay, "Fours right—march!" and away they went up the lonely valley, along the winding water, breaking into columns of twos and riding "at ease" the moment they had passed the point where the post commander and a little knot of officers had assembled to bid them God-speed. Captain Charlton bent down from his saddle to grasp the colonel's extended hand and whisper a few words in his ear, The colonel nodded appreciatively. "They can't escape," he answered low,

and then, watched by friendly eyes in that little group until out of sight, and by fierce and lurking spies until darkness shrouded them from view, the troop rode jauntily on its mission; Charlton and Blunt in murmured consultation in the lead, and forty-eight stalwart troopers confidently and unquestioningly following in their tracks. Who cared that an all-night ride through Indian-haunted wilds was before them? It was an old, old story to every man.

Were there "ghost lights" on the Niobrara that night? The Indian spies could swear by the deeds of their ancestors that the troop soon climbed out of the valley of the White River and rode briskly southward by the Sid-

ney trail, and that every man was in his place in column when they wound down in the "Running Water" flats at twilight. Yet hours afterward, far to the west, miles away at the Laramie crossing, there were twinkling, dancing, "firefly" gleams—like will-o'-the-wisps—through the chinks and loop-holes of that old log hut, and when morning came the ground was stamped with a fresh impress of half a dozen set of hoof tracks—shod horses, not Indian ponies this time.

It must have meant "bad medicine" for the Sioux, for when morning came all the bands that had been so confidently raiding the trails through the settlements found themselves compelled to

seek the shelter of their reservations. From Laramie to Sidney the stalwart infantry came marching to the scene, and from east, north, and west the cavalry came trotting, troop after troop, to hem in and head them off. The very band that ventured south of the Platte and killed in cold blood those helpless teamsters, and then sought the destruction of Gaines and his men, fleeing now before Wallace's troops, were met and soundly thrashed by our friends of Company B, with Captain Charlton and Lieutenant Blunt in the lead, and by Monday night the broad valley was clear of savage foes, the cavalry were resting by their bivouac fires, and then, from the lips of Captain Wallace, Charlton

heard the story of Fred Waller's exploit, and of the long gallop that brought about the rescue of Colonel Gaines. Our captain could hardly wait for morning to come, but in two days more he was standing by the bedside of his old sergeant at Sidney barracks, and Trumpeter Fred was there too.

One week later, in the big, sunshiny assembly room of the old barrack, an impressive scene took place, and a long remembered though very brief trial was brought to an abrupt close. A court-martial was in session at Sidney; the general who commanded the department had himself arrived to look into the condition of affairs about the Indian reservation, and with Captain Charlton had had a

long consultation, at the close of which the bearded, kindly-faced brigadier had gone to the hospital with the troop commander, and bending over old Waller as he lay upon the narrow cot, took his hand and talked with him about Five Forks and Appomattox, and then promised him that his wish should be respected. It was a singular wish—a strange thing for a father to ask. Old Sergeant Waller had insisted that his boy should be brought to trial before the court-martial then in session, and convicted or acquitted of the double charge of theft and desertion that had been lodged against him. In vain Charlton represented to him that it was not necessary, nobody believed the stories now; the

veteran was firm and positive in the stand he made.

"Everywhere in this department, sir, my boy's name has been held up to shame as a thief and a deserter. There is only one way to clear him; let him stand trial, prove his innocence, and let us fix the guilt where it belongs." And Waller was right.

Who that was in the court room that hot August morning, when the south wind blew the dust-cloud into the post and burned the very skin from the bronzed faces around the whitewashed wall, will ever forget the closing incidents of that trial? At the long wooden table sat the nine officers who composed the court

with their gray-haired president at the head, all dressed in their full uniforms, all grave and silent. At the lower end of the table was the keen, shrewd face of the young judge advocate who conducted the entire proceedings. On one side of him, quiet, self-possessed, and patient, sat little Fred, neat and trim as a new pin in his faultless fatigue dress. A little behind the boy was his captain, Charlton, and along the wall, at the end of the room, Colonel Gaines, with his arm still in a sling, and Captain Cross, with his piercing restless eyes and "fighting face." On the other side of the judge advocate stood the chair in which witness after witness had taken his seat and given his testimony, and now

at high noon it was empty, and the crowd of spectators, sitting in respectful silence around the room, craned their necks and gazed at the doorway in hushed, yet eager curiosity to see the man whose name had just been passed to the orderly. It was understood that the case for the prosecution depended mainly upon his evidence.

CHAPTER XV.

COURT-MARTIAL.

FIRST SERGEANT GRAHAM had sworn to the disappearance of the money at the Niobrara and the fact that at daybreak the trumpeter had gone with his horse, arms, and equipments. He also told of his belief that he and the men who slept near him that night had been stupefied by chloroform. Two other troopers told of the loss of their money at the same time; the hospital steward from Fort Robinson testified to Fred's

coming to him and getting a little vial of chloroform on a forged request from Sergeant Graham. Corporal Watts had positively identified a ten-dollar bill, which was in the trumpeter's possession when he was searched (at his own request) when first accused of the crime, as one stolen from him at the Niobrara. He had had some experience, he said, and had made a record of the numbers; and this record, in a little notebook, was exhibited to the court.

Not once had the defense interposed or asked a question. It was evidently the policy of Fred's advisers to let the prosecution go as far as it chose. And now came the announcement of the name that was most intimately con-

nected with the case, and Sergeant Dawson in his complete uniform strolled into court, removed the gauntlet from his right hand, and holding it aloft, looked the judge advocate squarely in the face and swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Then he sat down and glanced quickly around him, but his eyes did not seem to see Fred Waller, nor did they rest for an instant on Captain Charlton, who, tugging at his mustache, looked steadily at the face of his left guide. Then began the slow, painful, cumbrous method by which the law of the land requires military courts to extract their evidence, every question and answer being reduced to writing. Sergeant Dawson gave,

as required, his full rank, troop, regiment, and station, but hesitated as to the latter point. "I was left behind at Red Cloud when the troop came away Sunday a week ago, sir, along with Private Donovan, and we were kept there until I got orders to come here with the hospital steward. I just got in this morning, and I'm told the troop is back at the Platte crossing." But the matter of station was of no particular consequence, and the examination proceeded. Yes, he knew the prisoner, Trumpeter Fred Waller, Troop B, and had known him several years before he had enlisted. Told to tell in his own way what he knew of the circumstances that led to the charges

against Waller, the witness cleared his throat and began.

It was the night they camped at the Niobrara, giving the date, that the prisoner seemed restless. All the men expected the Indians to make an attempt to run off the horses, and all were wakeful, but he had most occasion to notice Waller, who didn't seem able to sleep. That night passed without alarm of any kind, but the next night it was very dark, the moon went down at eleven, and the horses got to stamping and snorting. Witness was sergeant of the guard, and all night long had to be moving about among his sentries and the herd. About midnight he had come in to the fire, where Sergeant Graham was

sleeping, to clean out his pipe, that had clogged. His leather wallet, with his money and some papers, was inside the canvas scouting jacket that the captain allowed him and others of the men to wear, and he took the jacket off a few minutes while he walked over to the stream and soused his head and face in the cold water, a thing he always tried to do when he felt sleepy. While there he thought he heard a call from the sentry up the stream and he ran thither, and it was just then that the horses began making such a fuss. He kept around among the sentries, trying to find out the cause, and did not go back to the fire until it was all quiet after two o'clock, and then he slipped into his jacket

and overcoat and hurried back to where Donovan was on post below the bivouac. There was some noise they could not understand, far out on the prairie in that direction. He never missed his money and the wallet until daybreak, when it was discovered that Waller had gone. He never heard him steal away during the night, and was simply amazed when told of his desertion. The lieutenant had been disposed to blame him at first for letting the trumpeter get away with his horse, but no man could have been more vigilant than he was. "The captain had never blamed him," he was sure from the captain's manner when he spoke to him about it at Red Cloud. And

Dawson looked confidently now at his commander, but that gentleman never changed a muscle of his face.

As was customary, the judge advocate inquired if the prisoner had any questions to ask, and the spectators were amazed when he calmly answered, "No." Big beads of sweat were trickling down the sergeant's face by this time, but he could not control the look of wonderment that flashed for one instant into his eyes at this refusal of a valued privilege.

"Has the court any questions?" asked the judge advocate, and to the still greater wonderment of spectators and witness no member of the court appeared to care to inquire further. When

Sergeant Dawson left the court room and walked away toward the barracks he knew that all eyes were upon him, and just as soon as he could throw aside his saber, helmet, and full dress he lost no time in getting to the trader's store and swallowing half a tumbler of raw whisky. He thought the ordeal over and that he was free. It was with a sensation of something like premonition that, as he came forth, he saw at the barracks the orderly of the court-martial, who had been sent to warn him that he would be called by the defense at two o'clock.

CHAPTER XVI.

PRISON AND PROMOTION.

THAT afternoon the court room was crowded when Sergeant Dawson retook his seat and glanced for the first time at the prisoner before him. In front of the boy was a little table, on which was a number of slips of paper. One of these was quietly passed to the judge advocate, who took it, wheeled in his chair, and read aloud:

"What answer did you give Lieutenant Blunt when he asked

if you had been outside the sentry-line the night the prisoner disappeared?"

"I told him that I had not, sir," was the prompt reply.

The judge advocate posted the reply on his record sheet, and wrote the answer below. Then came another slip.

"What answer did you give the captain when asked if any man had ridden back toward the Niobrara the morning the troop left there for Red Cloud?"

The sergeant's throat seemed to clog a little, but he gulped down the obstruction. "I said no man went back, sir."

"What buildings, if any, were there near the spot where the troop was in bivouac on the Niobrara?"

Dawson's face was losing its ruddy hue, but the beads of sweat were starting afresh.

"An old empty log hut, sir. I didn't take much notice of it, sir."

"How far from the sentries was it?"

"I don't just know, sir. Two or three hundred yards perhaps." His lips were beginning to twitch, and his eyes to wander nervously from face to face.

"How much money did you lose with your wallet that night."

"Over sixty dollars, sir; every cent I had."

"What answer did you give Captain Charlton at Red Cloud when he asked you if you had seen anything of it since that night?"

"I told him no, sir."

"With whose money were you playing cards then, below Red Cloud, on the Sunday the troop marched away, leaving you behind?"

Dawson's face was ghastly. He choked for a moment, then seemed to make a desperate effort to pull himself together. "It wasn't so, sir," he muttered; then more loudly, "It was just a few dollars I borrowed," he began, but looking furtively around he caught one glimpse of his captain's stern face, and just beyond him, through the open window, the sight of a tall, straight form in the uniform of the infantry. It was the provost sergeant from Fort Robinson.

"It wasn't mine," he weakly murmured.

Another slip, and in the same cool, relentless tone the judge advocate read:

"What reason had you for taking your horse to the post blacksmith, instead of the cavalry farrier, to be shod the evening you reached Fort Robinson?"

Again the pallor of his face was almost ghastly, a hunted and desperate look came into his flitting eyes. One could have heard a pin drop anywhere in the court room, so intense was the silence. For the first time Dawson began to realize that his every movement had been watched, traced, and reported—and still he strove to rally.

"He was a better horse-shoer, that's all."

"You have testified that you did not go outside of the line on the night of the camp on the Niobrara, and did not allow anyone to go back after the troop marched away. For what purpose did you, yourself, ride back and enter the log hut you described?"

"I—I never did," gasped Dawson, with glaring eyes and ashen face, "I——" but his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth, for Captain Charlton quietly arose, stepped forward, and placed upon the table a large, flat wallet, at sight of which the sergeant's nerves gave way entirely. He made one or

two efforts to speak, he struggled as if to rise, his eyes rolled in his head, and in another instant he was slipping helplessly to the floor. A young surgeon sprang to his side as the bystanders strove to lift him, and with one brief glance turned to the court: "Mr. President, this man is in a spasm, and should be taken to the hospital."

"Very good, sir," was the calm reply. "Major Edwards, will you see to it that a sentry is posted over him. That man must not be allowed to escape."

Two more witnesses were examined that afternoon—the provost sergeant and Captain Charlton. The former testified that Dawson had been gambling and

had lost heavily in the post before pay day; that on that fateful Sunday, bill after bill he had seen him pay—over one hundred dollars at the table in the gamblers' tent down below the reservation — before he interfered, warned him of the departure of his troop, and ordered him to report in garrison with his horse at once. Donovan had merely been a looker-on at the mad game in which the sergeant had sought to recover his losses.

Charlton stated that, after his investigation at Red Cloud, he was confident that Dawson was the trooper who rode back to the old ranch, and that something must be concealed there. Searching it late, Sunday night, he found

in the dugout a spot where the earth had been recently scooped away, and there in Dawson's old rubber poncho was the wallet with his papers and about two hundred dollars of the missing money, or what his men believed to be such.

And then, amid the sympathetic glances of all the court, young Fred told his strange but soldierly story. It was Dawson who asked him to get the chloroform for him at Red Cloud and gave him the folded pencil note; it was Dawson who suggested to him the idea of sleeping down below the bivouac that evening near where Donovan was posted, and it was Dawson who roused him suddenly and startlingly in the dead of the night. "Up with

HE SOUNDED THE RETREAT.

you, Fred, boy!" he had said. "Up with you, but make no noise. There's the devil's own news! The Indians are out everywhere! The lieutenant's just got a courier from Robinson, and he and Sergeant Graham have to write dispatches to go right to the captain at Laramie. You know the whole Platte valley, and how to get across and reach the Sidney road below?" Of course he did. "Then the lieutenant says, for God's sake lose not a minute; go for all you're worth; keep well to the west until you cross the Platte, and then make for the southeast, and warn back everybody who is coming north. He says Mrs. Charlton and the children were to come that way,

Saturday or Sunday, to join the captain at Red Cloud. You can save them, if you're in time."

Suddenly roused from sleep, Fred was bewildered for an instant; could only realize that his loved benefactors and friends were in deadly peril and that he was chosen to haste and rescue them, Dawson lifted him into the saddle; pressed some money into his hand to buy food when he reached the settlement or Sidney, in case he met no travelers this side; led him to the water's edge, and bade him lose not an instant. He never dreamed of harm or wrong or plot until his wounded father told him the foul charge against him, after his long and gallant ride that blazing Sunday.

Then for a moment the little man broke down and sobbed ; and old war-worn soldiers in the court turned away with glistening eyes, and the president, rapping on the table, huskily ordered the room to be cleared. Charlton's arms were around his trumpeter's shoulders as he led him to the open air, and to his father's bedside. "Cleared!" he said, in answer to the longing look in the sergeant's eyes. "Cleared! There isn't a man, woman, or child in all the post that doesn't know the verdict, and that Dawson is doomed to four years in prison." And then he left them together and alone.

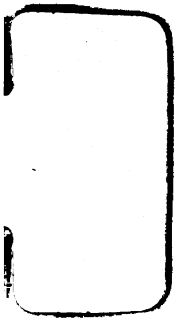
Dawson's trial and confession settled it all. He himself was the thief, who sought in this way to

replace the money lost in gambling and to throw upon Fred Waller, should he escape, the burden of the crime. But a merciful God had watched over the boy in his brave and loyal effort; had guided him in safety through a host of savage foes, and led him on to honor and vindication in the end. For months there was no happier boy on all the wide frontier than the little hero of the Sidney route; no happier father than brave old Sergeant Waller.

Long years afterward, riding one evening into a cavalry camp on the Southern plains, Captain Cross and the writer noted a tall, blue-eyed, bronzed-cheeked

trooper, whose twirling mustache was almost the color of the faded yellow of the chevrons on his sleeve. Despite dust and the rough prairie dress, no finer soldier had met their eyes in the long column that went flitting by.

"Who is that young first sergeant?"

"That?" answered Cross in surprise. "Don't you know who that is? Why, man, that's Charlton's old Trumpeter Fred."

THE END.